# Roman Holiday

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# Roman Holiday

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

Still living happily in England with Abigail, Will and Hannibal's romantic anniversary trip to Rome is delayed when Jack calls Will for help with an urgent new case back in the US. Hannibal starts getting more anxious the longer Will is away from him, and a surprise about who Will's been spending time with gets his jealous feathers all in a ruffle. Can these two work it out so that Will can *finally* pop the question?

This story will make a lot more sense if you've read the previous installments of my *Perfect Match* series, but I think you'd still be able to follow it if not.

Notes

cw: Brief references to an FBI case involving a child killer; no description or detail included.

# Chapter 1

The morning light crept subtly through the gauzy yellow curtains in the bedroom window. When he purchased them at the cute little country decor shop in town, Will had been in a whimsical mood. The curtains were the color of warm sunshine, and he thought that when the real sun shone through them, they would absolutely glow. He had been right; it was a lovely way to wake up, in their four-poster antique bed with the floral wallpaper around them and the sunlight coaxed into a warm, silken flow so that it seemed to melt over the room itself. It felt magical, as so much about the cottage always had, but there was nothing lovelier than waking up with Hannibal.

The warm, solid body beneath his own was intoxicatingly desirable, even when he was barely regaining consciousness, slipping his mind out from a delicious, heavy sleep. When he slept on his back, Hannibal tended to snore, but Will didn't mind. Hannibal had even warned him that this would be the result of the position, only to be silenced from his self-conscious, mild worries on the subject by Will kissing his mouth and murmuring that he wanted to sleep with his ear against Hannibal's heart and one leg flung over his, that it made him feel safe and happy. Hannibal didn't have to hear anything else to easily give in. And his snores were so soft, manly and adorable, Will couldn't imagine why his lover was so concerned about them bothering him. Perhaps the snores, when they occasionally woke Hannibal, sounded louder and more annoying in his own ears.

*Maybe even though we're constantly told to love ourselves, to center our lives on the idea that this is the only true love to enrich our world...we can never fully accept or adore ourselves the way someone else can, the one who is in love with us.*

*I'm in love with Hannibal. Always have been, always will be.*

Will sighed and nuzzled closer into Hannibal's chest, scenting out the spice and vanilla from his bath soap, the natural heat of his sleepy body. The older man always ran warm, like Will, and he loved the feeling of their two hot, needy forms merging, never content without the other. They used the same soap, of course, and so they smelled much the same, but they felt different. Will's physique was getting a bit softer on a steadier diet of Hannibal's rich, filling cuisine, but he was still slighter than his lover. And while devastatingly lethal in a fight against any enemy, Will surrendered under Hannibal with joyful grace. Hannibal was powerful, bigger and just as ruthless, if more methodical while Will was messy and unpredictable in the hunt. They spent much of their time teaching each other; Will showed Hannibal how to get messy and enjoy the loss of control while Hannibal demonstrated that within his command, Will could feel a structure he loved. It calmed him, the control which Hannibal wielded, and in return Will's submission soothed Hannibal's wrathful soul, an anger and sadness from childhood that had never quelled until he met a certain unconventional young profiler.

With a naughty smile, Will pressed a few soft kisses into his lover's hairy chest, then began slowly peppering the kisses lower...down to his cute, slightly soft belly, where he left the merest suggestion of a bite. Hannibal roused with a quietly plaintive moan as his fingers fell

automatically into Will's hair. He wasn't going to say anything, though. They never spoke during morning sex; it simply wasn't necessary. They told each other everything so perfectly with their bodies. This was one of Will's favorite rituals out of so many wonderful things they regularly did in their vastly romantic life.

So he didn't say *want you, Daddy,* instead he bit Hannibal's hip and licked the small knick left by his teeth, and Hannibal sighed, hearing the message loud and clear. His hips bucked slightly in a request for more attention. Will always lost his breath a little at the sight of Hannibal's morning erection, so big and gorgeous, whether barely constrained by a pair of pajama pants or nakedly exposed as it was on this occasion, bulging, flushed, and crowned with pearls of precum at the tip.

Hannibal gave another husky moan, and when Will closed his lips around the tip of his cock, the older man's foot slid up and down the sheets as if in blissed-out protest. So much, so soon, before Hannibal was even all the way awake...it was sweet torture. Will licked at him teasingly, then began sucking in earnest, long strokes getting deeper with every ragged breath through his nose (he was too excited, but that was okay, he was also way too eager not to make this fantastic for Hannibal.) Hannibal's hard flesh tasted of salty musk and his hot, masculine need, his craving for Will that had the older man's fingers twisting more tightly in Will's curls.

With his face tipped upward, Hannibal's lips parted to let out a long sigh, expressing delight and deprivation all at once. Will pulled his mouth off that irresistibly enormous cock and gave a low, wicked laugh. He repositioned himself with his legs spread over Hannibal's head so that they could suck each other, and soon they were engulfing each other's cocks in the tight heat of insatiable mouths, over and over -- Will thought he was going to come any second, could feel the pressure rising, but then Hannibal hummed around him, sending tingles of pleasure through his being and the clear message he was ready for more.

Just as he had expected from the low, thoughtful sound in Hannibal's throat, Hannibal released Will's cock from his mouth and spread his ass cheeks instead, licking deeply and letting out happy little sound of approval as Will moaned at the sensations flooding him like pure joy. He had the pleasure of Hannibal's cock gliding over his tongue to wreck his throat at the same time that he felt Hannibal's clever, relentless tongue preparing him for...oh, when was he ever going to get used to this? They had sex almost every day and night, but somehow it always felt like the first time in terms of excitement; the only substantial difference in mood was the way their relationship had matured, how the lies had fallen away to leave their souls naked and intertwined. How they had learned each other's bodies by heart so that now, they knew exactly how and where to touch at just the right moments to make this experience completely mind-blowing.

With a playful smirk, and still with sleepy eyes, Hannibal arranged Will on his side and grabbed the lube from the table by the bed. He got them both nice and wet, then slowly pressed into his lover, nipping Will's ear with his teeth as Will moaned and turned his head to capture his lips in a sweet, sloppy kiss.

Hannibal was so perfect like this, with his hair falling across his brow, a bit overlong and glossy with silvery strands threaded through the golden-blonde. Those brown eyes were so

warm and completely loving, burning with desire. His beard scratched beguilingly at Will's neck when his lips wandered there, and when his fingers toying with Will's nipples and his cock driving deeper inside him made Will give a weak, begging whimper, Hannibal growled and bit hard on a suck mark he'd left on Will's neck the night before.

Will gasped, close to coming, and that was okay; this kind of sex between them was more of a "Good morning" than the all-night marathon sessions they often enjoyed, experimenting with role play, spanking, bondage and more. When they woke up together, they were pleasantly sleepy but wildly horny at the same time, and this, *this* heavenly little tryst which they stole from the early hour was the ideal expression of that mood.

Hannibal's hips smacked against Will as his breathing got hotter and heaver; he reached around to stroke Will's cock and easily brought him off within a few expert twists of his big hand, and while Will was sweating and moaning through his beautifully intense orgasm, Hannibal fucked him through it until he came with a heady gasp and a warm burst of cum coating Will inside.

"Oh," Will sighed breathily as Hannibal eased him over onto his back with a knowing smile and a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "Jesus, ohhh…"

Hannibal was licking his cock again, savoring every drop of Will's release and sending him into oversensitive quivers of extended pleasure. Will shivered as his brow furrowed and he let out an involuntary noise he couldn't quite put a name to.

"Hannibal," he shuddered with another wave of gorgeous afterglow.

Hannibal looked up at him, finally having the mercy to stop sucking and licking at his cock. Lifting his light brows, the older man licked his own lips instead.

"I think you just made me *squeal,*" Will observed, blushing.

Hannibal flopped casually next to him on the pillow and drew Will into a hug. "You do make the most splendid sounds when I am worshipping your beautiful body, Will. It's little wonder you have me entirely obsessed."

"Mmmm," Will smiled, tucking a lock of Hannibal's hair behind his ear, "I'm mutually obsessed."

Hannibal looked at him so proudly and with such devotion that Will's heart swelled. Soon after, his belly grumbled.

"Ah. It seems you've worked up an appetite this morning, my dear," Hannibal declared fondly. He patted Will's belly, then kissed his cheek. "Why don't we shower, and then I'll make you some of those ricotta hotcakes you like so much?"

"You're too good to me," Will grinned.

Even though Hannibal made them so many different fancy meals all the time, somehow he always remembered the specific ones Will had liked the most, and put them into regular

rotation.

“Nothing is too good for you, Will,” said Hannibal, and a complicated glimmer of *something else,* some insecure hesitation or ghost of heartbreaks past, lit up his eyes for just a moment. It was there and gone so fast that Will didn’t see fit to make a big deal about it; he just laughed, bopped Hannibal softly with a throw pillow, and then raced him to the bathroom.

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“Your trip to Rome is coming up,” Abigail sang cheerfully at the breakfast table. She broke off a piece of maple bacon as her fathers fixed their coffee at the counter in their adorably shabby-chic kitchen. “You two must be so excited!”

“No parties while we’re gone,” Will smirked, causing his daughter to slump slightly in her chair.

With one lackluster hand, she stirred her tea as Will sat down across from her in his jeans, flannel and glasses, his curls still slightly wet from the shower. Hannibal, who was ladling food onto two more plates, watched them with such contentment, it was clear that even their small arguments were a source of domestic joy to him.

“C’mon, Dads, one party? Can’t I have one party? You know, Jamie’s birthday is coming up,” she pouted.

Will made himself a perfect bite of breakfast, combining ricotta hotcake, bacon, arugula and charred tomato. Lifting his fork to his mouth, he looked at Hannibal as his partner finally got to sit down and relax after preparing them this gorgeous morning feast.

“One party?” Will smiled, loving the way Hannibal kept his stern expression, embodying “bad cop” while Will remained in “good cop” mode this time.

With his thick hair slicked back from his forehead, Hannibal’s handsome features were sharply distracting, not least of all because he’d put on this one certain suit that tended to drive Will wild. It was a light brown plaid, three piece of course, the dapper waistcoat displayed now that Hannibal had, as usual, unfastened his jacket when he took his place at the table. With the sky blue shirt and purple paisley tie which absolutely should not match, yet mysteriously looked amazing, Hannibal had the ability to broadcast an automatic message to Will’s mind and libido that flashed *Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,* to the extent he had to make an effort to keep his thoughts on parenting Abigail at present.

“I don’t care to return from our vacation to find that our cottage has been reduced to a disreputable mess by college students,” Hannibal frowned. Still, his foot found Will’s under the table, and Will suppressed a smile.

“We wouldn’t make a mess,” Abigail assured him, causing her fathers to shoot her disbelieving looks. She sighed. “I mean, okay, we’d make a mess, but we would clean it all up. In fact, this house will be even cleaner than ever when you guys get home. I promise.”

“A bold vow,” Hannibal remarked, sipping his coffee, “Considering how clean this cottage is generally kept.”

“Even your most stringent neat freak tendencies will be highly impressed by my amazing cleaning abilities,” said Abigail archly, with a perfect impression of Hannibal’s lofty vocabulary choices.

“Well, I suppose if you’re going to have only one party, for Jamie’s birthday, and you absolutely promise to have the place immaculate by the time we come home,” Will shrugged, giving Hannibal an innocent look which they both knew was partly fake.

This little tug-of-war between them tended to help the family canvass both sides of any given debate, providing Abigail the indication she needed to feel that her fathers had heard her out and made a balanced decision. It was only necessary for cases like this, when at nineteen she was still young enough to need their guiding hand in deciding what was best.

“What do you think, Hannibal?” Will asked as Abigail’s bright eyes darted expectantly between them.

“I concur,” Hannibal said with a tiny smile when Abigail immediately gave a whoop of excitement. “Only if,” he added, lifting one finger, “I am unable to find a single trace of a mess afterwards.”

“You guys are the best,” Abigail declared, rising giddily from her chair to give them each a hug.

“That is rather indisputable.” Hannibal patted her shoulder as all three of them laughed.

“I gotta get to class.” She slung her messenger bag over one shoulder and flipped her auburn hair over her green jacket.

“Have a good day, honey,” Will smiled, and he and Hannibal finished their breakfast in quiet conversation, discussing their plans to leave in a few days for Rome.

It was their one year anniversary, and Will was brimming over with excitement for what he had planned during this trip. He had concocted the most romantic idea of how to propose to Hannibal, which he was sure would be worth the wait. Now that he had found the ring, black tungsten with elegantly sparkling diamonds and a special engraving of a stag on the inside, Will was feeling more confident by the day that this would be the ideal time and place to pop the big question.

“And what will you get up to today, my love?” Hannibal asked, his voice coy as he started to gather their plates to clear away.

“Stop that right now,” Will laughed, “I’ll do the dishes. Thank you for this fantastic breakfast, babe.”

“It’s nothing,” Hannibal shrugged, blushing slightly to show he still had a strong response to Will’s praise.

“It’s everything. Our life and the way you make me happy.” Will kissed Hannibal’s forehead, then carried the plates to the sink. “And in answer to your question, I figured I’d take the dogs down to the river, go fishing for a while.”

Winston wandered in from the sitting room and gave a quiet yip of approval. “I swear he speaks English sometimes,” Will chortled. “Yes, Winston, give me a few minutes and we’ll head out, okay?”

Buster scrambled past his brother to jump on Will’s leg, and Will melted into more laughs, bending to pat his head. “Okay, everybody, sit down and calm down for just five minutes.”

Annabelle, the poodle whom Hannibal had brought home as a surprise a few weeks ago, came wandering in primly, as if to gauge the reason for the racket. “We’re going fishing today, Annie,” Will grinned as Hannibal regarded his adopted pet with pride. She really was the spitting image of his own personality in dog form.

The pristine, fluffy dog ran in a circle around her brothers, just as excited for the day’s plans as the rest of the pack, her proper little paws making a soft scraping noise on the kitchen floor.

“Haha, I knew you’d like that,” Will smiled, returning to his work at the sink. To Hannibal, he added, “Thought I’d get in a little work on the Pickens’ boat later on, and by then, it’ll be dinner time. Are you gonna let *me* cook tonight?”

Hannibal stood beside him, his back leaned against the counter, taking in the sight of Will with his flannel pushed up to his elbows, displaying his strong forearms and beautiful hands getting wet and soapy.

“After a long day of fishing and tinkering with that boat repair? I think it’s only suitable that I take care of the cooking.”

“Daddy,” Will smiled gently, drying his hands off, then stroking Hannibal’s elegant cheekbone above the gorgeous scruff of his beard. “You’ll be working all day too, I know you have patients lined up for hours.”

Hannibal had taken up the post of the town doctor, and with all those quirky villagers, there was certainly enough work to keep him merrily busy. As a people person, Hannibal enjoyed the job, even if every once in a while he was obliged to subtract a rude individual from the already tiny population. This was done with equal merriment and Will’s apt participation, but they did have to be exceedingly careful. The vicar whom they had recently dispatched had caused a town scandal with his disappearance, and they would need to refrain from further homicide for the foreseeable future in order to keep their appearance as a kind, harmless local couple intact. It was worth it, because they really did love it here in their sweet little English village. They had made no plans to stay permanently, yet no plans to move back home to their house in Virginia, or elsewhere. For now, they merely drifted as they pleased, and for now it still pleased them very much to be right here, in cozy, rustic quiet.

“I have an idea,” Hannibal proposed. He hooked his fingers into the loops on the sides of Will’s blue jeans and tugged him playfully flush to his own body. Denim to fine, expensive

wool: it was a combination that never failed to get Will's pulse racing. "Why don't we cook together? You bring me some beautiful fish and we'll make…"

He trailed off, angling his face for a kiss as Will's angelic, yet aroused demeanor distracted him from what he had been saying.

"The orange saffron sauce," Will murmured, brushing his lips against Hannibals, his breath warm against the softness of that irresistible mouth. "And...rosemary fondant potatoes."

"That would be absolutely divine." Hannibal sighed, kissing Will slowly and attentively, keeping it just this side of passionate. "I wish I didn't have a patient at 9."

"We already had sex this morning, Daddy." Will gave him a roguish smile. "You're going to wear me out. I guess it's a good thing you *do* have to go to work."

"Naughty thing," Hannibal accused, sliding his hands easily into the back pockets of Will's jeans to give his supple ass a rough grope. There was a growl building low in his throat, suggesting he might be late to work today if Will insisted on teasing him any further.

They never got the chance to find out, as Will's phone vibrated from the table.

"Come *on*," Will groaned as Hannibal shot him a saucy look.

Will crossed the room and scooped up the phone as Hannibal said mischievously, "But I thought you were far too exhausted to possibly respond to my wiles again this morning. You must be glad for the reprieve."

"Keep it up," Will answered, his eyes sparkling, "I'll fuck you against that counter so hard you won't sit down at work all day. Or maybe you will, because you like to feel the soreness and remember who you belong to."

"A tantalizing proposition." Hannibal adjusted his tie and smoothed a hand through his hair, completely up to any challenge Will might select.

"Yeah?" Will said into the phone, which he'd answered only because it kept buzzing and he was too busy eye-screwing Hannibal to check the caller ID. "Oh." His face fell, causing Hannibal to stop grinning like a dork and look at him with concern. "Hi, Jack."

Hannibal was now full-on frowning.

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Jack never called for social reasons, he was far too much of a workaholic to do any such thing, and so Hannibal knew very well he must be pestering Will with a case. This was downright rude of him, with their vacation to Rome so near, and although the FBI supervisor didn't know of their plans, it still struck Hannibal as vastly reprehensible, a matter of personal offence. He'd obviously known they would return to the US eventually, but he wanted it to be because it was what the two of them wanted, and not because Will felt a sense of obligation. Jack would overwork Will if given the slightest chance, and in any case, with

his typically possessive nature, Hannibal didn't like anyone else having that amount of influence over his lover.

"What am I up to?" Will asked, arranging his face back into a smile which Hannibal knew was meant to reassure him. He appreciated it, but it didn't make him feel better at all. The people-pleasing, sacrificial side of Will was a part of him that could all too easily lead the profiler to bend over backwards trying to satisfy others, doing more work than anyone else. Hannibal loved the way Will was here in England, totally relaxed and free with himself, even his killer side. A return to duty was repulsive by comparison.

"Well, I'm in sunny, beautiful Gloucestershire, England," Will continued, strolling out to the front yard as the dogs frollicked behind him, noting the slight change in mood but not worried about it. The pups scampered out into the crisp fall day, wandering in the garden which had by now surrendered to the chill of the mornings, petals falling to the ground as foliage carpeted the small lawn behind the white picket fence.

Hannibal followed, wordlessly slipping Will's coat onto his shoulders as the younger man had just realized he needed it. With a grateful smile, Will patted Hannibal's hand and softly kissed his knuckles. "Right now," he told Jack, "I'm looking at the most beautiful view you can possibly imagine."

Hannibal's cheeks turned pink and Will grinned, unbothered now by Jack's intrusive call. It was only intrusive because he knew it wasn't a call to see how they were doing; it had to be a case. And he didn't want that life currently; maybe someday he would want to go back to work, but he was fulfilled out here in the country, living simply and still finding his true self, breathing freely. The last thing he felt like doing was dragging himself back to his old job at this point. He liked Jack, respected him, even understood why the agent felt he must call upon his formerly best profiler if pressured by a tricky new case where time was of the essence, but he was confident he could extricate himself from the conversation without committing to help.

Will listened as Jack inevitably launched into a description of the case, a series of brutal murders spread across several cities in Virginia. "Listen, Jack, I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm not up for field work right now…"

Hannibal heard this with some relief, as he lingered by the garden gate under the auspices of petting the dogs, then throwing a stick for them to chase. Yet he found himself sighing in near-dejection a few moments later when he heard Will repeating, "Kids?"

Oh, dear, that would be the sticking point. If children were in danger, Will would unquestionably feel obligated to assist.

"That's terrible," Will said very seriously, already regaining that wan look he got when the weight of the world sat on his shoulders. "Uh huh." He rubbed his forehead, now forlorn. "Jesus, that's. Yeah. God. We have to, of course. Okay, let me look into flights, I'll call you in an hour."

Hannibal's heart crumpled as Will ended the call and cast him an apologetic gaze.

“You have to go,” he guessed.

“This lunatic is going after kids, Hannibal, killing them. I don’t have a choice.”

“Of course you don’t.” Hannibal went to Will and wrapped him up in a hug, his body a warm shelter from the bittersweet chill of the day. “I understand, Will. We can postpone the trip to Rome.”

Will nodded, a lump in his throat and a conflict in his eyes which Hannibal could not quite discern the source of. As if Will regretted the need to wait for their trip, for more complicated reasons than simply it was their anniversary and they had been looking forward to it so much. Curiosity and confusion mingled with Hannibal’s annoyance (which he knew was unreasonable; it wasn’t as if he wanted a child killer left at large either. He knew there was no other choice but for Will to go to America and assist in this case. He also couldn’t help the sinking feeling in his heart at the idea of Will being away from him for who knew how long).

“Perhaps I should accompany you,” Hannibal suggested, running his fingers through Will’s curls, then cupping his jaw. “I can help you hunt this despicable specimen and together, we can put a quick end to his deplorable exploits.”

“Wish you could,” Will sighed, pressing their foreheads together, “But your patients need you, and there’s no replacement doctor around here for miles. Plus...you know Jack was already a little suspicious about us when we were back home, before coming to Europe. Even though Chilton took the fall for the Ripper murders, and Jack’s been placated by that, trusts us again...we shouldn’t risk that by being too obvious. You and me, hunting together in Virginia...that’s too damn obvious, Hannibal. We’d be caught.”

“Then I will remain here and look to my patients. I’ll explain your absence to Abigail, and, I suppose, find something else to do on the evening of her party.”

Will laughed softly, acknowledging Hannibal’s attempt to cut the tension of this situation with soft humor. “It won’t take long, baby.” Will kissed his brow, then smoothed his hands over Hannibal’s face, over sculpted cheekbones and bristly beard, full lips parted on a regretful sigh. “I swear I won’t be gone long at all.”

Hannibal nodded and squeezed his hand. Far be it for him to apply pressure to make Will feel badly about leaving him, when there were young lives in peril and Will had more than enough on his mind. He resigned himself as best he could to Will’s absence without really believing it would be of as short a duration as his lover guessed. He resigned himself to the anxieties which he knew very well would take him over the moment Will was out of sight and on his way to the airport.

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After Will’s departure, Hannibal did his best to stay busy, knowing it was the only thing that would stop him obsessively pining for his lover to the point of dangerous distraction and the possible detriment of his mental health. He went to work, paid extra attention to helping his patients as thoroughly as possible, spent time with Abigail (piano lessons for her, knitting lessons for him), and made a few trips outside the village to blow off steam in a more

conventionally Hannibal Lecter-esque style. He made sure that his murder victims were selected from areas far enough from their home to avoid suspicion, and that he left no evidence behind despite the fact that Will's absence had him nearly feral, much more brutally unhinged than usual in his methods -- not even that picky about who he chose so long as he could tear them nearly to pieces.

And of course, there was his cooking, wherein he came up with plenty of new, overly complicated recipes to "kill" some time, an apt activity after all, since he had a good deal of fresh meat on hand. Furthermore, he sat out on the front porch drawing quite often, sometimes sketching Abigail, the dogs, the cottage and yard with its foliage-covered garden, but mostly it was just drawing after drawing of Will.

Three weeks melted by painfully as he endeavored to stay too much occupied to seem pathetic and clingy when Will called and texted him. It was especially difficult on their video calls, when Will would explain mournfully that another victim had gone missing and the killer was exceptionally hard to pin down, but he hoped to God it would all be over soon. Hannibal's role was to support his partner, show concern and offer comfort, a sturdy understanding that he would always be there, believing in Will. His role was most certainly *not* to cause Will further anxiety with tales of how miserably lonely life was without his love by his side, how he knew he was growing increasingly neurotic about it by the day, without quite knowing why.

He couldn't truly be that worried that Will might get hurt, or worse -- Will was a merciless killer himself, and anyone who confronted him violently would certainly rue the day. It couldn't be a concern that Will might decide not to return -- that was ridiculous, absurd, and otherwise nonsensical, surely -- difficult to stop thinking about, difficult to stop picturing, but not at all likely. Will was entirely committed to their relationship, and how many hundreds of times had he told Hannibal so, had he talked his lover down from the latest bout of paranoid possessiveness? Still, Hannibal was painfully envious of anyone else who had the opportunity to spend time with Will, even at work, even in passing. He felt that stress over whether Will would feel drawn to his old life, or even his normal-passing previous existence of morality, if not perfect sanity. That Will would regret choosing a life chained down to a cannibalistic serial killer, a monster, and that he would decide a regular, safe, moralistic existence was much more desirable. What if he simply grew tired of Hannibal and realized it once he was far enough away from his admittedly smothering influence?

But he must not breathe a word of this to Will; it must be carefully concealed. He forced smiles and even laughter on their calls, sharing amusing stories of Abigail, the dogs, the townspeople, anything he could think of to avoid the subject of --

"How come you never talk about *you*?" Will asked one night.

Hannibal's fake smile faltered slightly. He gazed at Will, sitting in the kitchen of their sweet timber-frame house back in Wolf Trap, the first place they had purchased together as a couple, epitomizing "sophisticated rustic flair" as they had joked at the time, enjoying the chance to combine their individual home style preferences. The lights were dim, and Will was digging into what looked very sadly like a restaurant take-out salad, garlic bread and a

beer on the side, nothing even close to the quality of food he ought to be eating. The fact that he wasn't there to take care of Will was almost as awful as not being able to touch him.

"Oh, there's not much to say. I keep busy, my dear, and miss you terribly."

"I'll be home soon, Hannibal. I'm going to stop this son of a bitch so he doesn't hurt anyone else, I'm going to destroy him. And then we're going to Rome and we're going to have an *amazing* time. We deserve it, and I cannot *wait.* You know that, right?"

Will paused with a forkful of lettuce in what looked like a disappointingly watery balsamic vinaigrette. Hannibal's possessive instincts were pushed almost to their limit, but he merely squeezed his hands into tight fists, digging his nails hard into his palms as he smiled warmly.

"Of course, my darling, I know it won't be much longer now at all."

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"What is this?" Hannibal inquired of Abigail one morning when she came cheerfully prancing into the kitchen, practicing some moves she had learned from a recent dance class at the studio in town.

Languidly spinning about with the usual elegance she applied to any task, Abigail took the jug of fresh orange juice from the fridge, then took down a glass from the cabinet. At the table, with his lonely breakfast of perfectly fluffy scrambled eggs and thick-cut bacon, Hannibal frowned at the leaflet his daughter had left there for him at his usual place.

"Oh, it's a new yoga class that's starting up at the studio where I've been dancing," she explained, sitting down across from him with a plate of food to match his own. "I thought you might be interested. Look, Dad, I know how tense you've been since Dad had to go back to the States, and I don't blame you. I miss him too, you know? I was kinda hoping some mindfulness exercise might be beneficial."

"That is extremely thoughtful of you, Abigail," Hannibal remarked truthfully. It touched his heart that his daughter had considered his sadness in this way and tried to find a solution. Honestly, it might not be the worst idea, either...one more extra activity would eat up even more time in his miserable days, and as a former psychiatrist he knew perfectly well that yoga was an excellent way to relieve stress.

"Perhaps I will attend a class and see if it is a good fit for me," he continued.

"Good, I'm so glad," she smiled, so lovely with her bright blue eyes that reminded him of Will, making his briefly calmed heart sink once again.

Abigail continued eating her breakfast with enthusiasm. "Dad, this is absolutely delicious, how come you look so morose? Aren't you enjoying it?"

"How can I enjoy it?" He pouted, grateful that at least with Abigail he could slightly drop the mask of being just fine, even if he could not entirely show how unhappy -- and therefore

terrifyingly dangerous -- he really was. There was no point worrying Abigail with the thought he might lose his senses any day now and go on a full-on killing spree hereabouts.

“How can I enjoy it,” he repeated, “knowing that five hours ago when Will had *his* breakfast, it was most likely something utterly atrocious, such as an egg mcmuffin? And that is if he did not skip breakfast altogether -- a horrific habit and one he was given to prior to our becoming a couple.”

“Oh, Dad,” she sighed, standing up and walking over to him for a hug. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this. He really will be back soon, I know it. And in the meantime, the yoga might really help.”

“Yes,” he said blankly, hugging her back and patting her hair, feeling nothing but desolation inside.

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At first, Hannibal hoped the yoga class might have been an outstanding choice. The teacher was knowledgeable and more than efficient, guiding them through an hour-long workout with a nice combination of moderately challenging to relaxing positions, suitable to someone like him who had a passing knowledge of yoga but had not practiced it in a while. As he stretched and followed the flow of his breathing, he tried to stay in the moment and find meaning in it, even knowing that this was one more day leading to an inevitable conclusion of sleeping alone (or *not* sleeping, but staring forlornly at the ceiling for many hours, then feeling like a zombie in the morning)

His memory palace offered no solace; Will was present in every single room, but his aura felt ghost-like, tainted and haunted by his own doubts and confusion. Hence, he tried to follow along with care when the teacher told them to focus only on their breathing and the soothing music, plus the pleasant stretch and exertion in which they were engaged.

It might have actually worked, if only for a little while, had he not been stuck between two of the most obnoxious specimens of gossip he had met since Freddie Lounds. To one side of his mat was a young man with a nasal voice who kept muttering across him to the young woman he had come with, apparently a close friend. They talked incessantly of some relationship troubles they were each having, and the key theme was that the man (Hannibal could not help overhearing that his name was Dan, since it was said quite as loudly as the rest of the chatter) believed his girlfriend might be having an affair, while the woman (Lilly) assured Dan this was quite likely.

“That’s exactly how it started when Mike started stepping out on me,” Lilly confided to Dan in the cozy English accent of the village, usually a pleasant sound to Hannibal, but not in this case. “He just started spending more and more time at work, to the point I knew he was either out with his mates or just banging anyone in sight who wasn’t me. He got to that seven year itch and needed a bit of strange, d’you know what I mean?”

“Dan and Lilly, can you please keep it down?” The instructor, Fiona, requested politely as she passed by their mat.

“Yes, could you *please*?” Hannibal added, poison laced through his tone as he cast them each a deadly glare.

“Oh, come off it, mate, we’re just having a bit of a chat,” Dan replied, unfazed.

“Good work, Hannibal,” Fiona praised, “That’s an excellent Warrior II pose.”

“Thank you, Fiona,” said Hannibal with his head held high. *Just focus on the breathing. The* breathing --

“Well, so anyway, she’s spending way too much time, you know -- ‘at the office,’” Dan continued as soon as Fiona was basically out of earshot. He managed to make exaggerated air-quotes as they changed position to start a Vinyasa flow, and Hannibal found it beyond rude at the same time he wondered how these two were able to maintain an ongoing animated discussion while going through their cat-cows and upward dogs.

“I’m telling you, it’s all over, mate, you’d do best to call her out and see what her cheating, lying arse has to say for herself,” Lilly advised, sad but sagely.

“Suppose you’re right,” Dan sighed, “Bloody hell.”

“Yes,” Hannibal smiled for the first time since they had started chatting, “Quite.”

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Hannibal followed the two of them back to Dan’s house where they were apparently planning to have tea, and murdered them with passionate brutality, stabbing them each dozens of times, still finding no comfort, except in knowing the yoga studio would be spared their annoying antics forever after. He wore gloves and paid all his usual attention to leaving not one spot of DNA, and in addition had been lucky enough that Dan had been painting his living room, and the place was already liberally covered in plastic, making for easy clean-up.

If Will was there, he would have smugly bragged that it was clearly preordained he should kill this obnoxious duo, and Will would have rolled his eyes and grumbled before admitting it had been great fun, despite being a reckless act given their proximity to the village. However, Will was *not* there, and as Hannibal cleaned his knife and triple-checked the house to make sure he left no trace of his presence, all he could think about was the foolish discussion the friends had been sharing during yoga.

Now, he knew very well that people in long-term committed relationships were not automatically tempted to cheat because a certain amount of time had gone by. But the strangeness of his nature made him especially prone to doubt his hold on Will, to wonder if someone more conventional would ultimately prove a temptation if Will was away from Hannibal long enough. This was maddening, and now he had one more paranoia to add to a growing list. Worst of all, he knew Will would be deeply hurt if he knew all it took was one ill-timed overheard conversation on the subject of infidelity to make Hannibal wonder if he would ever stray. Will was loyal, completely true, and Hannibal hated himself for these thoughts. If only killing Lilly and Dan had also shut up their voices in his head.

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“When I sent you to yoga class, that really wasn’t what I had in mind, Dad,” Abigail chided him as they cleaned up after dinner that night. “You need to cool down or you’re going to get caught.”

“I can look after us quite adeptly, Abigail,” he assured her, doubting it slightly but determined to maintain his confident attitude.

He only had his stubborn pride left to keep him from disintegrating into tears and collapsing into her arms, and while he knew Abigail would gladly offer comfort, that would be the beginning of the end. He must not lose control of his emotions, or at least any more than he already had.

“If you say so,” she sighed, obviously seeing right through his veneer of unflappable coolness, but knowing his prideful and sensitive nature too well to push him any further on the subject.

“Thank you for always knowing when to let a subject drop,” he said, briefly clasping her shoulder.

“Of course, Dad,” she said, covering his hand with an understanding smile. “I get it. You know me, I hate being coerced into talking about stuff I’m trying to deal with on my own. It’s understandable. I’m here if you change your mind and need to vent, though, okay?”

“You are the most wonderful daughter a father could ever wish for,” he smiled, trying not to let *this* make him burst into tears.

“Aww, thanks, Dad,” she grinned as Hannibal’s cell phone rang from the counter beside the sink.

He dried his hands off and answered it, nearly dropping the phone in his haste to speak with Will.

“Hey, honey, I just wanted to call and say hi,” Will said breezily as he walked outside the house (Hannibal knew because he heard the screen door slipping shut behind him).

“You sound much more relaxed than I have heard you in weeks,” Hannibal said, happy Will seemed to be faring well even as the way he missed him kept boring a deep wound in his heart.

“Well, we got him,” Will explained, so proud Hannibal could picture how he was beaming. “Shot him down cold today and they carted him off to the morgue. He’s not going to hurt anyone ever again, and *God* do I feel better. I haven’t slept in weeks.”

*Nor have I.* Hannibal felt a slight twinge of guilt for being so anxious for weeks on end simply from missing Will, while Will had to deal with being apart from him and the terrible stress of cracking a child killer case, all at the same time. It did seem selfish, and he was glad he had never complained to Will about his ongoing crisis.

“I know, my dear. I only hope you’ll be back in my arms soon so that I may console you for all you have endured. You’ve worked yourself into a frenzy, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, but I kept *us* in mind the whole time, you know? It kept me strong.”

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal full-on grinned for the first time since Will had departed, “I’m so happy to hear you say that.”

They talked for a few more minutes, with an edited version of Hannibal’s day (he could share more details when Will was back home, as the latest murder would be a point of contention and he preferred to have any more complicated discussions in person). Will explained that the soonest flight he had been able to book was in several days; he had to finish some paperwork and other obligations for the FBI, close the case properly. Never in his life had Hannibal been tempted to actually bite his nails, but the thought of still not seeing his Will for another half-week sent a wave of nausea through him that made the idea suddenly appealing. He settled for pointlessly kicking the pristine white fence, which didn’t move an inch, unsurprising since the move had been so half-hearted.

He was just…*drained*, perhaps most of all from having to keep it from Will. And even though it would be fine to confide in his lover now, since the case was over, his pride still kept him close-lipped. Was it only pride, he wondered, or some odd fear of pushing Will away by needing him too much? Shouldn’t that be gone by now, after a full year of loving each other so powerfully? He resented his own weakness.

“Listen, I gotta go, I’m working on a home-cooked meal tonight -- thought you’d be glad to hear I’m not eating Chick-Fil-a or something,” Will chuckled, not guessing at how much Hannibal was silently suffering.

“Will, please do not tell me of such reprehensible dining choices,” Hannibal pleaded with a hand to his heart. “Do you know how long that food is kept refrigerated before--”

A muffled voice sounded from somewhere in the background of Will’s location, and Hannibal’s heart seemed to stop in his chest. Why did that voice sound familiar? Why did his murderous instincts immediately flare at the slightest intonation of it?

“Is someone else there?” Hannibal demanded a little too fast and harshly, almost choking on every breath.

“Oh, uh, well, see the thing is…” Will trailed off.

Hannibal knew how Will was when he got like this: he was slightly trying to lie about something, and because their relationship was so deeply honest and intimate, Will could not effectively lie to his lover. He’d blush prettily, tug his ear, bite his lip, fail to properly conceal his deceit. Hannibal's blood burned.

“Will,” said the familiar male voice in the background, “You gotta come stir this sauce or it’s gonna actually calcify.” A good-natured laugh followed from the speaker, soon echoed by Will laughing, so casual as if this was all perfectly *fine*--

“Will,” Hannibal growled into the phone, “Is Caleb Thornton at our house? Have you actually invited your former *date* over whilst you are away from me?”

“Oh, Jesus, I knew you’d have that reaction,” Will tried to reason. “Yeah, he’s here, but there’s a good reason. See, we’re--”

Just then, the reception cut out and the call ended, as if the Gods themselves had seen fit to spare Hannibal listening to Will’s excuses as to why he would possibly be so cruel as to let that flirtatious, Will-Graham-enamored buffoon Caleb anywhere near him while a continent and an ocean away from Hannibal.

It was just as well, really. Hannibal threw the phone against the side of the cottage in a fit of fury; it smashed into pieces and left a mark on the house, chipped paint falling down into the grass. He didn’t care.

He was not about to linger a moment longer here in England while Will was under the influence of an unscrupulous, despicable fop like Caleb Thornton, who would doubtless do anything to seduce Will away from him. While he refused to let in the idea that the seduction had already occurred between Will and this disgustingly *normal* former acquaintance, he obviously had to fly to the United States that very evening and set matters right.

# Chapter 2

“Well, I knew you’d come,” Will said, opening the front door to admit Hannibal late in the next afternoon.

He was wearing a faded blue flannel shirt with jeans and his glasses, looking so quintessentially like himself, so truly present after all of Hannibal’s yearning that it felt surreal.

Will looked ready for a confrontation, slightly wan with worry but sure he was in the right to the extent he also looked quite annoyed. And, Hannibal noticed, still entirely in love with him.

Despite the look on his own face, which he knew must be a statue-like display of foolish pride and stubborn aggravation, Will still enfolded him in a tight embrace, muttering up into his ear, “I missed you so much. I know you’re mad at me and I don’t even care. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I care,” Hannibal said, returning Will’s embrace stiffly although it broke his heart not to hug back as thoroughly as he really wanted to. “I care that in my absence you are apparently entertaining former lovers--”

“For fuck’s sake, Hannibal,” Will complained, stepping back from the hug and giving him a disdainful, hurt face. “I can’t believe you seriously think I would *cheat* on you. That’s beyond the pale, you know. Why would it even *occur* -- oh, by the way, I never actually slept with Caleb, so you’re beyond off base about that, too.”

He took Hannibal’s suitcase despite being quite reciprocally infuriated by now, and set it down in the living room. Hannibal’s heart swelled to be once again in their old home (“old” only in the sense of having been some months away in Europe, yet it seemed as if years had passed since they had left this place and their life here).

The room, with its elegant piano and fluffy dog pillows fanned out right behind it, reminded him of the times he had played the instrument only to discover their pets were entertained and soothed by the music, to Will’s delight and Abigail’s amusement.

Will always seemed to drift into the room when he heard Hannibal playing his wistfully melancholy compositions, overflowing with egotistically complicated flourishes which failed to hide the gnawing sense of conflicted longing within his heart. And Will would comfort him, praise his talent wordlessly, sitting beside him on the bench to study his solemn profile which softened before his eyes and the movement of his deft hands over the keys, or else hovering behind him, leaning down to drape arms around his shoulders and kiss his neck. Will's scent, of the fine cologne with notes of warm vanilla, amber and nutmeg which Hannibal had bought him, and his own natural essence, overflowing with affectionate desire, was utterly intoxicating.

Hannibal had wanted to melt into such moments of companionship wherein no words were needed, only the delicate flow of the music and Will's adoration meeting his own in equal measure. And yet they had found so very many wonderful times together since then, exploring their violence and their love to every extreme, soaking up the beauty that the world had to offer and changing it as they saw fit. He was afraid to let every moment end, as if it might prove to be his last with Will, as if this could not possibly be his to keep, and yet where had that paranoid obsession led him, except to loose ends and hurting Will's feelings with unfounded suspicions? They had to be able to move on, but he could never seem to believe in their happiness and let go of everything else.

So many precious memories of the times they had shared in this beautiful house filled his mind and made him regret coming here so hastily on the wind of his uncontrollable temper.

"Will," he tried to explain, "You must understand that we have now been apart for a full month, and the last voice I ever expected to hear during our phone call was--"

"Mine," said Caleb, having the nearly incomprehensible nerve to come walking into the room from the kitchen, as if doing so was not a blatant request to have Hannibal slit his throat. "I gather there's been some misunderstanding here."

"Has there?" said a second man, this one a stranger, who had trailed Caleb into the living room. He quirked a dark eyebrow in delighted amusement.

They made a funny scene: Hannibal, standing across from Will casting him a look of barely smothered despair, then glaring at the two guests with contempt, not bothering to question who the stranger might be. Will, looking exhausted, offended, yet eager to make this all right again somehow. Caleb, seeming so friendly towards everyone else but giving Hannibal a subtle look of annoyance. The two of them had never liked each other; they had both wanted Will and both knew it.

The stranger, who was a very tall and elegant man with fluffy greying curls, a neat beard and a passably nice suit topped off by a foppish red scarf, held a glass of white wine in one hand. He smiled in immediate admiration at Hannibal and held his free hand out to shake in greeting.

"Well, hello there, you must be the famous Dr. Lecter," the stranger smirked in a haughty British accent. "Anthony Dimmond, I'm absolutely charmed to meet you. Do you know, all this time I thought Will was *exaggerating* about your looks, but clearly not."

"Oh, he's nothing to write home about," Caleb said coldly as Hannibal, in a deep state of confusion, shook Anthony's hand, ignoring the British man's sly wink in his direction.

"No one holds a candle to you, my darling, but I hope you don't mind my appreciating beauty in general, when I see it. As a connoisseur of the arts, I can't really help it, if you know what I mean." Anthony brushed a kiss to Caleb's cheek, and Caleb gave into an indulgent smile in return.

"As long as I'm always number one," Caleb laughed, threading his fingers through Anthony's own.

“Hannibal,” Will put in, neatly transitioning to help clear Hannibal’s baffled daze, “Anthony is Caleb’s *boyfriend.*”

“I see,” said Hannibal curtly.

His mind was reeling -- he had been so sure Caleb had been “putting the moves” on Will, as it were, only to learn that the Baltimore chef had his own partner and probably no design to rekindle his relationship with Will. He blushed, actually *blushed* with infuriated humiliation at his wild conjectures and insane jealousy. Part of him wanted to run away, part of him wanted to pummel Caleb to bits anyway, just for that little satisfaction since he had always despised the man. Most of all, now he despised Caleb for being so smugly innocent.

“And normally we’re one hundred percent monogamous,” Anthony continued, looking as if divine inspiration had just struck. “But may I just say, if you’re all game for a little menage a *four*, I would definitely not say no.”

“Oh, definitely not,” Caleb frowned. He leaned into Anthony’s ear and muttered, “Read the room, we’ve talked about this, sweetie…”

“Indeed,” Anthony said with a quick recovery. “I thought it was worth asking, my dears. You really are all so absolutely gorgeous and fascinating.”

“I knew which flight you’d be on, the soonest one,” Will acknowledged to Hannibal alone, as if he was the only one in the room who mattered, and the others were mere evidence presented like supporting characters in a cozy mystery, trotted out for the big final reveal. “So I asked Caleb and Anthony if they’d mind coming over again to help me explain to you what’s been going on.”

Hannibal’s mouth had gone dry, he was holding back tears and the desire to fall to his knees to beg Will’s forgiveness, but simultaneously he still wanted to rip Caleb’s throat out with his bare hands. It was so unfair, unfortunate and otherwise inescapable that if he surrendered to that temptation, he would be sleeping on the couch for the foreseeable future.

“Will asked me for some cooking lessons,” Caleb explained, looking annoyingly handsome and *not* guilty of any mischief or wicked scheme. His hunter green sweater brought out the same shade in his eyes, and his auburn hair was slicked back stylishly. Hannibal hated him so much; he never wanted this good-looking, *nice* man anywhere near Will, ever again.

“Oh?” he managed, considering the artistic value of potentially painting the walls with Caleb’s entrails.

“Yes, I wanted to make you an authentic Lithuanian dinner sometime,” Will shrugged. “Thought it might be nice for you, since you hardly ever get the chance to enjoy the food from your own country. Caleb was helping me make a traditional potato pudding when you called.”

“Kugelis,” Hannibal ventured. He felt sure his face was one hundred percent flaming red by now.

“Yeah,” Will elaborated, looking caught between frustration and the desire to explain himself. “ I tried making it by myself but it came out terrible, all I could taste was salt and apples and potatoes, as if there was no way they could blend together the right way. I called Caleb for advice and he was kind enough to offer to help me out. Didn’t tell you when we talked on the phone because I wanted it to be a surprise, that someday you’d come home and I’d have a traditional Lithuanian meal ready for you.”

“I ruined the surprise,” Hannibal said tightly, his eyes far too wet; he was beyond humiliated. He would leave this place at once and take this unbearable embarrassment with him. “I ruined it as I ruin everything. Good afternoon.”

He turned quickly and almost raced from the house, cursing Will’s love of nature for the fact that the only place to go from here was right into the woods. It was dark out by now and he’d never felt so alone. He had taken a cab from the airport, and he had no intention of calling another now: no one was going to see him until he composed himself, and as a further complication, he truly had no idea where he was going.

“Hannibal,” Will panted, jogging up to him alone, carrying Hannibal’s coat. He grabbed his lover’s shoulder firmly. “Stop it. Put your coat on, it’s freezing.”

“Don’t worry about me, Will. Go back to your guests, I’m sure they are far better company--”

“I said,” Will interrupted, gravel and tenderness in his tone as he cupped Hannibal’s face and claimed his gaze even when Hannibal tried pointlessly to resist him. The coat fell to the crunchy leaf-covered forest floor, and in the shadows Will claimed Hannibal effortlessly as his own. “I said stop it, Hannibal. I don’t care about them, I told them to go home. So cut it out, I know you’re intentionally making this worse like picking at a wound. You’re in pain, and you insist on running away instead of telling me what’s going on.”

Hannibal bit his lip hard and flexed his fingers, baffled -- should he embrace Will, should he beg for forgiveness before touching? Did he deserve to touch Will after such disgraceful conduct on his part?

“Aren’t you angry with me?”

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Will sighed, releasing Hannibal’s face as he leaned down to pick up the coat. Arranging it around Hannibal’s shoulders, he added, “It’s easier to think I must be so mad at you, I couldn’t possibly forgive you or see your side of things. Then you don’t have to be honest with me or yourself about what’s really at the root of this.”

Hannibal ducked his head in shameful silence, his pale lashes dotted with tears, his jaw tense.

“Baby, I am mad at you, a little, but I’m not concerned with that right now. It’s not important,” Will said emphatically. “I’m hurt that you think I would betray you, or that you think so little of yourself as to assume there’s another person on this planet who could possibly appeal to me now that I’ve had you.”

Hannibal’s shoulders shuddered and he nodded, the tears now cascading down his face, coating his regal cheekbones to slide from his chin like rain.

“Come here,” Will soothed, pulling him into a warm embrace and rubbing his back. “Hannibal, we’re both going to mess up and piss each other off sometimes, that’s normal. What’s important to me here and now is that you’re in pain, terrible pain, I can see that -- and you need me. So I’m right here, and I’m not going to yell at you for being jealous and flying here to most likely draw and quarter my friend. I am going to hold you until you feel like you can talk to me. And I will never leave you in any real way, ever, okay?”

Indeed, for quite some time Hannibal could not speak. He cried, hunched sloppily over and clinging to Will, tears drenching Will’s flannel collar where it was exposed beneath his own hastily thrown on coat.

He let Will guide him back to the house and straight to the bedroom, where Will slid their coats off, then laid them down and wrapped himself around Hannibal, still whispering words of love and comfort. That he was here, he was never going to abandon Hannibal, he loved Hannibal and would do so forever.

“You’ve been working so hard...I know what it does to you, and how you devote yourself to such causes,” Hannibal sniffed, loathe to complain of his lot in consideration of Will’s ordeals over the last month. “I know it is difficult for you to be away from me, as well, and how I have disrespected your own burden with my--”

“Shhh, never mind all that,” Will reassured him. “I know you would have helped me catch this killer if you could, and I know you know I can’t stand being without you. But we’re together now...I can't tell you how glad I am to have you back in my arms. I missed you *so* much. I don't even feel like me without you anymore.”

“You’re so good,” Hannibal sighed, looking up at Will with big, glistening eyes. “I’ve never been good a day in my life.”

“Liar,” Will smiled with gentle humor. “You take care of me and Abigail, you teach and protect us, always. You’re full of love and light, and if you’re bad, too...well, so am I, and then some. That’s what makes us *work,* baby. Now please, tell me what’s really bothering you, underneath all of this other stuff.”

“It’s...I can hardly say,” Hannibal fumbled. As tumultuous theories began to pummel his thoughts like stormy ocean waves, his fingers scrambled for purchase over the softness of Will's flannel.

“It’s about Mischa,” Will guessed, his voice so careful and soft. The lights were off, enveloping them in each other's warm presence in the darkness. And there was no judgement or assumption to this moment between them, only the perfect intimacy of a love that was ready to understand and help with anything at all that might come out of Hannibal’s mouth next. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes, I...Will. I can’t seem to fully accept that you are mine, and you won’t think better of it someday and leave me. I know you believe we are forever, but...after what I did to you early in our relationship...the psychic driving, the lies, the plans to hurt you even more...I cannot quite fathom that you have entirely forgiven me. I do not feel I have earned it, nor your trust.

If it seems as if I have shown a lack of faith in you, please know it is only that I do not believe in myself."

"Part of you wouldn't blame me if I left you," Will surmised, nuzzling closer into Hannibal's chest and rhythmically massaging his arm. "Part of you is waiting for that to happen."

"Always." Hannibal sighed. "I cannot...I *will* not forgive myself for my inability to protect Mischa."

"And so you won't allow yourself to believe I could forgive you for hurting me and lying to me?" Will finished. "Oh, Hannibal…"

"I'm sorry." Hannibal began to repeat, not only to Will, but to the spirit of his sister who haunted his memory palace, innocent and defenseless to the monsters who had taken her while merely laughing at Hannibal's childishly pathetic attempts to save her. "I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you." Will smiled up at him with so much love, then kissed his tear-stained lips. He said something next that he had never allowed himself to say before, knowing that by now it was true, after all their hard-fought victories over the troubles in their past. "I trust you, Hannibal."

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Will held Hannibal until he felt well enough to get up and have something to eat, although Will insisted on cooking.

"Please, just relax and let me take care of you for once," he smiled, kissing Hannibal's forehead as the older man sat down at the table, unused to not being the busy one if a meal was to be prepared, not used to being the one coddled and pampered.

It had long been his joy in life to take care of Will, but as true partners, it was something they could both give to each other. It was "okay," as Will had encouraged him, to need this extra love and care; it was no bother to Will but brought him happiness, as it made Hannibal blissful to lavish Will with excessive attention.

And so Hannibal let Will make him an omelette and some toast, paired with crisply smoky chardonnay. He was coming down from his previous panic to discover just how out of his mind with anxiety he had truly been, and it felt incredibly good to have finally brought those feelings out into the light and understood them.

"I fear I'm not a very good psychiatrist anymore," Hannibal joked mildly, although there was some truth to the suspicion in his mind. "I did not understand my own reasons for being so certain you would one day leave me."

"It's hard to think about things like that, Hannibal, so hard. I thought my childhood was difficult, but...I can't imagine what you went through." Will held his hand and squeezed gently. "I wish I could go back in time and make it so that never happened to you, save Mischa, save you...all I can do is love you now, the best I can. All of me is yours, okay?"

Hannibal nodded, a lump in his throat. “Yes, Will. Thank you, my love. Your endurance astounds me.”

“You’re not someone I endure, love. You’re my world. I adore you. Believe it and don’t let it go.” Will patted his cheek fondly. “I will never let you go.”

“Every time I think I finally understand just how lucky I am, I realize anew that it is beyond my understanding,” Hannibal smiled. "Now that I more clearly see through the reasons for my paranoia and anxiety in your absence, I can endeavor not to behave with such foolish jealousy from this day forward."

"Well, let's be honest, Hannibal. I'd be mad if you killed Caleb for giving me cooking lessons, but at the same time...I want to slit Alana's throat every time I see her, because all I can think of is that you used to flirt with her. If I ever saw someone lay a hand on you in desire, I'd cut their hand right off. So you see, I do understand, and I don't mind you being possessive. How can I, under the circumstances? I'd kill to have you, and I'd kill anyone who tried to take you away from me."

Hannibal sat up a little straighter in his chair, beaming now with pride and delight; the possessive and jealous side of Will never failed to send him into elation. "So if I can retain my possessiveness while never again allowing myself to suspect you would be unfaithful..."

Will nodded, tugging coquettishly at the sleeve of Hannibal's sweater, then caressing the sensitive skin on the inside of his wrist. "Exactly, baby. We'll still always be *us*, but you have to trust me, too."

"I do, Will," Hannibal assured him, "I promise."

"Good." Will winked, "Then I forgive you, you absolute terror." He turned Hannibal's hand over and lifted it to his lips.

For a few minutes they ate their meal and enjoyed the wine in companionable silence, Will snuggling his foot against Hannibal's under the table.

“I hope you know we’re still going to Rome next week,” Will smiled, soothing Hannibal with the well-timed subject change. It was good to work on the pain of the past, but to inundate himself with it was unhealthy. They were alive and had each other now.

“I suppose I haven’t ruined everything then.” Hannibal looked down at himself for the first time since departing England, finding to his disdain that he had practically catapulted across the Atlantic whilst wearing the soft grey lounge trousers Will had given him to “be cozy at night in,” along with his favorite red v-neck sweater. “I cannot believe this is what I wore to come and slaughter my supposed rival.”

“Oh, baby,” Will sighed with a loving smile, standing up and pulling Hannibal against his belly for another hug, “You didn’t ruin anything at all. And you’re still plenty scary in your pjs.”

“Will,” Hannibal laughed whole-heartedly, rubbing his cheek against his lover’s flannel, “You do say the nicest things.”

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“Do you remember the night we watched *Roman Holiday*?” Will asked Hannibal a week later as they stood hand in hand before the Trevi Fountain in Rome.

It was a beautiful day, cold but clear, brilliant blue skies and puffy white clouds overhead, happy tourists buzzing around them speaking in many languages. The fountain was bigger than Will had expected, with crystal water flowing from ornate Baroque statues.

“How could I forget? You cried like a baby,” Hannibal recalled.

“Oh, please, like you weren’t just as much of a wreck. Anyway, being here with you is like being in a movie. Rome is as I imagined it, but...more vivid and a little wilder?”

“Yes, one does have to be especially careful when crossing the street. All those narrow roads and remarkably fast little cars.”

“Cynic,” Will laughed, wrapping an arm around Hannibal’s waist and resting his head on the older man’s shoulder.

In his dapper grey suit, Hannibal looked so handsome and divine, the hero of Will’s love story. And Will liked to think he had done a pretty good job of picking an outfit for himself on this all-important day. He had gone through the “trusseau” of fancy suits which Hannibal had commissioned for him and had tailor-made, selecting a cobalt skinny-fit one that brought out his eyes, paired with a light blue shirt and a tie to match the suit. If Hannibal wondered why Will had chosen such formal attire for a day of sight-seeing, he made no comment on it but savored his curiosity on the subject with an easy-going smile.

“Are you happy here?” Will goaded playfully.

“Very, mylimasis.” Hannibal kissed the top of his head. “I haven’t been to this place in many years. In consequence, I had forgotten how apt the imagery of the fountain truly is. The ‘Taming of the Waters,’ portrayed by the blend of water and rock, and the figures of the Tritons taking control of Oceanus’ shell to tame the unruly sea monsters.”

“It’s striking and very pretty, Hannibal. But I don’t want to tame you.” Will grinned and snuck a saucy grope of Hannibal’s ass while no one else was looking, enjoying the flush that came into his lover’s face.

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Next on their sight-seeing itinerary was the Mouth of Truth, a solemn statue build into the wall of the portico at Santa Maria in Cosmedin church. Remarkable, that the church was so plain for the most part, with a narrow interior done up in neutral tans and browns. In addition to the famed statue from the movie *Roman Holiday,* the unassuming church was home to a glass shrine containing the skull of St. Valentine. The skull’s shrine was appropriately similar

in appearance to a holy tabernacle to contain the body of Christ, and Hannibal was impressed that for once the church had properly equated human adoration with the glory of God himself. Hannibal would rather eat and drink of the blood of human life and love any day, than touch a drop of holy wine. The Almighty had never done a thing to bring happiness to Hannibal, had only tormented him with miserable, taunting destiny, but Will turned everything dead and awful into vibrant new chances.

Despite the skull's dilapidated appearance, which spoke to Hannibal's fear of the passage of time, he was cheered to see that the priests had decorated the saint's bones with a fresh, bright floral crown. As the days passed, the flowers would wilt, but a new crown would replace the dead one. Perhaps he and Will were the same, growing into new and better versions of themselves each day, cherishing the parts of the past worth saving, mourning the tragic without living in continual terror of its resurgence. Guiltless and free.

"Another image of Oceanus, the Sea Titan and Primeval Father," Hannibal mused, standing beside Will in this part of the church that was essentially a museum. "Odd to find such a popular attraction so uncrowded in the middle of the day."

"I guess we just got lucky," said Will with his eyes shining and a distinct skip in his step.

He was so excited he could barely breathe, so he wasn't sure his attempt to play it cool had Hannibal entirely convinced. In fact, he had paid to have the place to themselves for a few minutes to help him pull off this carefully wrought romantic scheme.

Hannibal just gave him a coyly curious, very flirtatious little glance and then regarded Oceanus' foreboding face again, the features so strong and unmistakable despite the structure of the statue wearing down inevitably with time.

"Hmm," Will mused, sliding his hand into the statue's astonished-looking mouth. "Hope I don't get my hand bitten off."

"We'll put it on ice if so," Hannibal replied pleasantly. "It will survive just fine to be sewed back on at the local hospital as long as we arrive there with due haste."

"Ah!" Will joked, grabbing his hand back with his coat wrapped around the "stub" of his wrist, as if the statue had indeed chomped his hand right off.

"Let me see here," Hannibal smirked, reaching into Will's coat to pull his fingers out. "It seems you are still intact, my darling."

He kissed Will's fingers and smiled, "Dare I try the same feat?"

"I think you have to, how often does one get the chance?" Will's heart pounded relentlessly through his ears. This was it…

Hannibal laughed again and put his hand into the statue, only to pause with the next joke on his tongue fading away into pure surprise. "Will," he said tightly, drawing out the engagement ring which Will had left in the statue's mouth.

“Okay, I came up with a whole speech, but I didn’t write it down, so bear with me,” Will said, taking a deep breath, blushing at the way Hannibal stared dumbfounded at the beautiful black ring in his hand, sparkling with diamonds.

“This is the Mouth of Truth, and I can’t think of a better way to tell you mine,” said Will, getting down on one knee and taking Hannibal’s hand as he continued looking back and forth between Will and the ring in his other hand, heavy with meaning in his palm as he trembled with emotion and shock.

“You and me and Abigail, together we’re a family. I’ve never had that; before meeting you, I didn’t even think I wanted it. But Hannibal, I am so desperately in love with you and so wildly happy, I have never felt so complete. The only thing more I could ask for is that this lasts forever.” Will smiled nervously and clasped Hannibal’s shaking hand, his grip warm and centering.

Hannibal just nodded, tears of joy spilling from his eyes and a big smile spreading across his face; he had never looked more gorgeous.

“I want the family I never thought I’d have, and I want it with you, I want our life together to be *always,* love.” Will took the ring from Hannibal’s other hand and posed it at the correct finger. “Hannibal Lecter, will you marry me?”

Hannibal nodded again, barely holding himself together, about to disintegrate into complete bliss. “Oh, Will, yes, my darling, a thousand times yes. I’ve--” he laugh-cried as Will slid the ring onto his finger. “This is beautiful. I’ve had a ring for you, carried it in my pocket every day for months now, waiting for the right moment, wanting it to be perfect.”

Will helped him to his feet and pressed their foreheads together. “Me too, I’ve wanted to propose since before we came to Europe, I just kept thinking it wasn’t quite the perfect time. But maybe there’s no such thing as perfect time, there’s just you and me and what we want. We can have it now.”

“Then I think you’d better take this,” Hannibal chuckled softly. He reached into his trousers’ pocket and took out Will’s ring, which looked like the inverse of his own, white gold with black diamonds. Inside, there was a delicate etching of a black rose.

“I can’t believe we chose the same colors and both had something engraved inside,” Will grinned as he admired the ring on his own finger. “We really have begun to blur.”

“We should take a photo of this moment, or Abigail will never forgive us.” Hannibal took out his phone and held it overhead, capturing the two of them with their faces pressed together, holding up their hands to show off the rings. They grinned so hard it hurt wonderfully, and Will knew that same amazing pain of a love so deep it was unbearably intense would be with him every day, forever.

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